

Building Our Power to Make Change and Stay in School: Student Leadership Councils

by Ami Magisos and Robert Ojeda

Student leadership and civic education have been an integral part of adult education at Pima Community College in Tucson, AZ, where Student Leadership Councils (SLC) are built into each of our schools. Strong student leaders serve as a bridge between students, staff, and community, and together build the power to make the changes that students want to see in the school and community. Through the course of ten weeks to a year, student leaders:

- find and strengthen their voices, and learn to work together
- identify and explore an important problem affecting students and the community
- plan and carry out an action together
- evaluate and reflect on what they've accomplished and learned in the process.

STAGE 1: Building a Team

The first meeting of an SLC is all about the students getting to know each other and learning how they can work together to make change.

The students, who represent the full range of adult education, look a little uncomfortable at first. The facilitator welcomes the group, and everyone shares why they've come and what expectations they have for the SLC. Students pair up and talk in depth about who they are and what's most important to them in the school and community. In this first meeting, new students hear from experienced ones about what the Council has accomplished before, like raising money for school equipment and advocating for a night bus route to the center for the evening students. By the end of the meeting, participants are smiling and chatting and making plans to tell their classes about the Council.

STAGE 2: Choosing and Exploring a Problem

The next step is to identify and analyze a problem. It's time to figure out what's going on in the school and community and consider how the group can make a difference. Sometimes students or staff come to the Council with something they see as a problem. Leaders in the Council share their own experiences with the problem and ask their classmates, which helps them determine how common and how serious the problem really is. They also consider if the problem is something that they can influence. If it's something that would take years to change, they might decide they're not ready to take it on in the Council. Sometimes even big problems, however, can be broken down into small solutions that are manageable as a project in a Council.

"The problem is vandalism in our parking lot," the manager of the learning center tells the Student Leadership Council facilitator. "Is this true?" the facilitator asks the group at the next meeting. Students share stories they've heard about car break-ins, stolen stereos, and suspicious characters in the school parking lot. They talk about how many students are hesitant to come to school due to safety problems. "We've got to do something about this!" one student leader says. An-



Student leaders in Tucson exploring a possible action.

other suggests that the group find out how many people are affected in the school. To learn more, they plan to conduct an informal survey.

As student leaders consider creative ideas to solve the problem, they also need to consider who has power over the problem: The students themselves? The school? The neighborhood? The local, state, or federal government? The area businesses?

The following week, sharing the stories they collected from their classes, they decide it's time for action. "How can we learn more about security in our parking lot? What has happened in the past and who has helped us before?" asks the facilitator. Students discuss different options: putting up signs, organizing student patrols, planning police safety workshops, or getting a security guard. Students interview the school directors and find out that the city government has not been helpful in the past, so they decide to start "closer to home."

STAGE 3: Taking Action

It's challenging to take action in a group. Often in Councils, leaders want to get out and solve their problems themselves – patrol the parking lot, buy the needed equipment, or take turns doing daycare. However, sometimes the system needs to change for the solution to last, and the student leaders' work is to pressure people who work in the system to take their needs into account. In the case of school parking lot safety, students carefully plan to bring their concerns and ideas to the right people: the managers and dean of the program, who both share their concerns and who could find some resources to address the problem. The facilitator helps them think through how to create a meeting where the students remain in control of what is happening, and where they are clearly able to express their stories about the problem and their proposals for change. This preparation is critical to the success of the action.

Students invite the managers and the dean to come talk about the problem, and they spend the next SLC meetings learning how to lead an effective public meeting. They collect background on the interests of their guests

and they plan the roles that each student will have in the meeting.

The big evening comes: students are nervous, but they support each other. "We are the ones running this meeting, let's remember that," says one student. When the guests arrive, the students feel intimidated, but follow their plan and describe the problem and impact of crime in the parking lot. One student leader shares a story about having his car broken into and how insecure and suspicious he now feels coming to school, even though he is committed to studying. After discussing some possible solutions, the dean says, "There is a chance we could bring a security guard to the center. I'll look into it and let you know what I find out."

STAGE 4: Evaluating the process

The final step is to evaluate what was learned through the process of creating change. Even when the action doesn't completely solve the problem, the students can still learn from their reflections. Often, they realize that there are other questions they still have or there are other actions they can take that they didn't see before.

In the next Council meeting, students evaluate how it went with the managers and the dean.

I was surprised that I wasn't afraid to talk to them. They were listening to me," says one student. "I felt comfortable because each of us had a specific role. And we responded carefully to what they said," another student comments. "It was easier than I thought for us to do this together!" says one young GED student.

A few weeks later, the Dean arranges for a security guard at the school. The guard starts watching over the parking lot, and vandalism and theft are markedly reduced at the school. The student leaders report back to their classes what has happened.

In the process of building their team, choosing and exploring a problem, and carefully taking action, student leaders increase their power to make change and create the conditions they need to stay in school.

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